

“Confronting Recidivism: Prisoner Re-entry Programs and a Just Future for All Americans”

Opening Statement of Congressman Mark Souder

Committee on Government Reform and Oversight

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Good afternoon and thank you all for being here. Particular thanks to our many witnesses who have traveled great distances to be here.

The impetus of this hearing is owed to the Gentleman from Ohio, Rob Portman and the Gentleman from Illinois, Danny Davis. Their leadership has brought the issue of prisoner reentry to the fore of domestic policy. I also would like to thank the full Committee Chairman, Tom Davis, and Ranking Minority member Henry Waxman, for their work in making this hearing possible today.

My thanks go as well to the Gentleman from Maryland, Elijah Cummings. With so much activity swirling around us at the beginning of the 109th Congress, many schedules are quite full. But Mr. Cummings commitment to this issue has helped to bring us together today. For that I am grateful.

Crime statistics have been debated for decades, but not until recently have these debates included the crisis of recidivism. Thanks certainly is owed to the two Members of Congress testifying today for raising the profile of the issue, but much of the credit is owed to those who have been in the recidivism trenches for years.

After more than a decade of tough crime policies, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 2 million Americans are held in Federal state or county jails. Over 4 million Americans are on parole or probation.

And it should be surprising to no one that well over half a million inmates are being released every year. Logical questions arise, “Where do these people go? What job skills do they have? Who hires them? Are they rehabilitated?” The answers to these questions are not very encouraging.

Many of these paroled and released inmates will return to prison within three years. According to the Government Accountability Office, in 1998 the percentage of re-incarcerations among all admissions at state and federal prisons was 35%, up from 17% in 1980. Broader surveys show a recidivism rate of nearly two-thirds of all inmates.

The first failure clearly is to the inmates themselves, many of whom enjoy few advantages and bear many burdens upon their release. Secondly, however, the system also fails the American public. Indeed, many released inmates will commit violent crimes on innocent victims.

The government institutions and faith-based and community addressing recidivism are addressing one question, “How do we reform a system whose participants often return to the same old behavior which the system was originally designed to deter?”

As more states, and more community-and faith-based groups address recidivism, the need for a national strategy becomes clearer. Moreover, the recent *Booker* Supreme Court decision on sentencing guidelines may result in the release of many more prisoners than otherwise expected.

The U.S. Department of Justice Young Offender Initiative, for instance, provides grants for state and community cooperation in parolee supervision and accountability. At the state level, Texas is considering placing its inmate release programs with the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), which already runs numerous programs in cooperation with the state.

The witnesses assembled today, have all brought down the rate of recidivism by making better men and women of released prisoners. All of them are heroes in our eyes.

Today we will learn more about national strategies from two expert Members of Congress and a host of state, local and private sector leaders. We will have policy makers on the same panel with a current parolee and his mentor.

On another panel we will have reentry program graduates and reentry program leaders. We will also have a prison Chaplain who leads this vital reentry work from the moment inmates begin their sentences.

Thank you again for being here today. I look forward to hearing more about recidivism from our experts who are with us today.